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FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1068
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 4256
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS KABUL 003602

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR SCA.FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A,G/IWI
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE
NSC FOR JWOOD
OSD FOR KIMMETT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPOL](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM AF](#)

SUBJECT: WORKING TO ACCOMODATE RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Hindu and Sikh leaders recently contacted Human Rights Officer to register a complaint that local Afghan residents had restricted ritual cremation rites. The Afghan Ministry of Hajj and Islamic affairs assured us that it will work with this small religious minority to balance its needs against the interests of the larger community. This incident sheds light on how nascent Afghan government institutions are beginning to execute their responsibility to protect minority rights. End summary.

SIKHS AND HINDUS IN THE AFGHAN CONTEXT

¶2. (SBU) Post Human Rights Officer recently met with Atwar Singh and Ronder Singh, the chief representatives of the Hindu and Sikh communities in Kabul. Both men were born in Afghanistan and speak Dari, Pashto and Urdu. They requested the meeting over a September 27 case in which local Muslims blocked the ritual cremation of the corpse of an elderly Hindu man, saying the ceremony would pollute the air and frighten the children. Messrs. Singh told Human Rights Officer the history of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan, saying that both groups made up a significant part of Afghanistan's population in the past, but that numbers had begun to drop in the 1970s and that there are now about 500 Hindus and Sikhs living in Afghanistan, mostly in Kabul. During the 1990s, waves of attacks on Hindu temples by ordinary Afghans complicated relations between the Sikhs and their Afghan neighbors. Atwar Singh told Poloff that, under the Taliban, security actually improved, but restrictions on Sikhs increased. Sikhs and Hindus were shunned and made to wear distinguishing clothing.

LAND DISPUTE AT ISSUE AS WELL

¶3. (SBU) Ronder Singh said he cremation issue is complicated by a land dispute. The area where the Sikhs and Hindus live and have their main temple -- Jada-e-Maiwand in southern Kabul -- was granted to them in 1919 by then-Interior Minister Arbatan Singh, but no clear title to the land exists. Singh said that a petition was presented to local authorities to build a modern crematory there but officials suggested it be built much further out of Kabul.

MEASURED AFGHAN GOVT RESPONSE

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¶4. (SBU) In an October 04 meeting with the Ministry of Haji and Islamic Affairs, which is responsible for monitoring religious freedom issues, Deputy Minister of Social Affairs Qazi Sulaiman Hamid told Human Rights Officer that he knew of the recent complaint, characterizing it as a neighborhood dispute. He noted that Hindus and Sikhs had been allowed in the past to burn their dead under special dispensation from the ministry and that his ministry supported the Hindu and Sikhs, desire to adhere to their customs. When Human Rights Officer followed up on October 23, Hamid Edayatullah, the director of the Religious Freedom Department, said that the local residents who had blocked the September 27 cremation had promised they would not interfere in future cremations, and that there had been no further complaints to his ministry from either Hindus or Sikhs.

¶5. (SBU) We will continue to reach out to the Hindus, Sikhs and other minorities and encourage the ministry in its efforts to protect the rights of religious minorities generally.

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